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DEPARTMENT FOR AF AND AF/E
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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: DISCUSSION WITH PM ON BORDER, OGADEN, NDI AND HR2003

Classified By: DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION DEBORAH MALAC FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶11. (C) Summary: Following AFRICOM General Ward's November 8 courtesy call on Prime Minister Meles, Ambassador and DCM stayed behind to raise with the PM several issues of interest. Meles said the departure of Somali Prime Minister Ghedi offered an opportunity for progress on reconciliation, but only if President Yusuf reached out to broaden the base of the TFG. On the Eritrea-Ethiopia border issue, Meles repeated his position that Ethiopia has no intention of attacking Eritrea, and decried media reports that war was imminent. Clearly exercised by H.R. 2003, Meles said he could not accept the fact of the U.S. Congress dictating to Ethiopia how it should set up its Electoral Board. He admitted that there had been some logistical problems related to food distributions in the Ogaden, but that the GOE was working to address them. Finally, Meles said that NDI should work with the National Electoral Board to train local election observers. End Summary.

Somalia and Somaliland

¶12. (C) In a wide-ranging discussion of regional and domestic issues on November 8, Prime Minister Meles told Ambassador and DCM that the resignation of Somalia's Prime Minister Ghedi and the recent decision in Baidoa to permit cabinet members to come from outside Parliament marked an opportunity to make progress on national reconciliation. Cautioning that Somalis move on a slower timeline than even the Ethiopians, Meles advised the Ambassador to have patience as it will take time for the selection of the new Prime Minister who had to be Hawiye/Abgaal. Once the new Prime Minister was in place, Meles said the TFG could then focus on reconciliation, including broadening the composition of the TFG, and negotiating with other clans and moderate members of the former Council of Islamic Courts.

¶13. (C) On Somaliland, Meles urged the U.S. to fulfill its promise to have President Dahir Kahin Riyale visit the U.S. The visit would benefit both the U.S. and Somaliland. Kahin would be more receptive to discussion and coordination on counterterrorism issues because the visit would allow him to consolidate his base of support at home for cooperation with the U.S. Meles also suggested that the U.S. consider

inviting Puntland's president for a visit as well.

The Border

¶4. (C) Moving to the Ethiopia-Eritrea border issue, Meles reiterated what he has told us several times in recent weeks) Ethiopia does not want to fight and will not start a war. He also said that Eritrea was in no position to fight and Isaias, capacity to wage war was diminishing daily. The biggest threat at the moment, said Meles, was if the Security Council inadvertently legitimized the EEBC's virtual demarcation of the border. If that happened, Ethiopia would withdraw from the Algiers Accord, he added. Meles also raised international media (specifically Washington Post) reports and the recent International Crisis Group report, calling them dangerous because they were fabricating information when they claimed that the U.S. was giving a green light to an Ethiopian invasion of Eritrea. Such misinformation, said Meles, played directly into Eritrea's hands and only served to heighten tensions.

Ogaden

¶5. (C) The Ambassador gave a brief readout on our concerns regarding the Ogaden and the October 31 meeting he had hosted on the topic. He stressed that we want to work together with the GOE to find a way to get food into the region. Citing his own experiences as an insurgent fighter as evidence, the Prime Minister stated emphatically that the GOE has no strategy to starve anybody, and that starvation, especially

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in the context of an insurgency, is exactly the wrong strategy to employ. Meles admitted that there have been problems with food deliveries) shortages of trucks, truck drivers who are stealing shipments for their own personal financial benefit, and truckers refusing to travel to the reason out of fear. He said he has asked the ENDF to provide additional trucks) and they have done so, although even this effort did not work out quite as intended. The ENDF provided 80 trucks for food delivery, but DPPA (the GOE agency charged with emergency response) sent them all to Fik, said Meles. When he inquired why they all went to Fik and not elsewhere in the region, Meles said DPPA told him it was because the NGOs told them that is where they should go (based on the recent Save the Children nutritional survey). Although clearly frustrated by this particular incident and the internal bureaucratic issues it displayed, Meles also noted frustration with NGOs, media and some of the Diaspora who continue to push to try paint everything that the GOE does in a negative light.

H.R. 2003

¶6. (C) Not surprisingly, Meles raised H.R. 2003. He was quite exercised. Saying he could understand that some members of Congress might criticize Ethiopia or even push for a cut-off of all assistance, Meles said he could not, however, accept that the U.S. Congress would dare to tell Ethiopia, as a sovereign state, how it should set up its own electoral board. &I do not understand8, he said, &how legislators, many of whom are lawyers and understand the impact of legislation8 could agree to legislate for another country. Meles said he used to believe that the somewhat &disorganized orchestra8 that was the U.S. system of government ultimately always made &beautiful music8. The passage of H.R. 2003, however, has made him reconsider this belief.

¶7. (C) In response to a request for clarification about the possible return of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) to Ethiopia, Meles said NDI was free to return to help build the institutions of democratic governance. He said that the GOE and NDI had different definitions of civil society organizations, but that they could discuss where and how NDI might work with some of those groups. Meles also offered that NDI could perhaps train local election observers or under the auspices of the National Electoral Board, but not independently.

Comment

¶8. (C) Clearly chagrined about H.R. 2003, reports of crisis in the Ogaden, and continuing negative media reports, Meles was very direct in expressing this frustration. He is trying to keep the GOE response in check, but was forthright in saying that fighting the propaganda battle was distracting everyone from the real work of addressing problems. The Embassy continues to discuss options related to a return of NDI to Ethiopia and whether we can find a framework that will be acceptable to NDI and the GOE.

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